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BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss technologies in the meat industry and the processes that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food Safety and Inspection System (FSIS) use to review new technologies and to protect public health.

Before I begin, as this is the first time I am appearing before this committee, let me take a moment to introduce myself. I am Al Almanza, Administrator of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). I've been with FSIS for almost 30 years and held numerous positions, beginning on the slaughter line in Dalhart, in the Texas panhandle. Prior to becoming Administrator at FSIS, I was the Dallas District Manager. I believe my field experience at the front lines of the Agency helps my work a great deal as Administrator. As a District Manager, and now as Administrator, I know that there are things that can be done at the Agency that would benefit all – consumer groups, industry, and employees. One such thing is encouraging the use of beneficial new technologies in the meat industry.

FSIS' New Technology Staff

Application of new technologies may help protect consumers from physical, chemical, or biological hazards; reduce or eliminate such hazards in the product itself; and improve product quality. Conversely, the use of an inappropriate technology could result in a product that could endanger public health.

At FSIS, we recognize the value that new technologies can offer for public health. Many new technologies have resulted in significant improvements in the safety of meat and poultry products. For this reason alone, FSIS would like to see new technological advances continue, provided those advances are deemed safe and appropriate.

Because the development of new technologies often requires large amounts of capital and extensive infrastructure, many establishments – especially small and very small establishments – have difficulty taking advantage of new technologies. This is one of the reasons why FSIS set up a New Technology Staff (NTS). NTS, working with our training, outreach, and education employees, provides assistance and disseminates information on new technologies.

Evaluating New Technologies

The development of new technologies is largely initiated by industry itself, as it responds to consumer demands. There are two different types of technologies that are

subject to review: processing technologies and ingredient technologies. Processing technologies are those technologies developed to aid in the production of meat, poultry, and egg products. Examples of processing technologies that have been reviewed include carcass washes, the steam vacuum, and steam pasteurization.

Ingredient technologies are those technologies that involve the addition of an ingredient to a product or the use of packaging to ensure safety, increase shelf life, or provide other consumer benefits. Examples of this kind of technology include carbon monoxide packaging and irradiation.

Processing Technologies

There are four basic questions FSIS asks when evaluating a new processing technology:

- Will this technology affect product safety?
- Will this technology affect inspection program personnel safety?
- Will this technology interfere with inspection?
- Will this technology be consistent with existing regulations?

Establishments planning to use a new technology are responsible for ensuring the continued safety of their workers, their products, and the environment, inside and outside the establishment, as well as responsible for providing the information necessary for FSIS

to examine the impact of the new technology on inspection procedures and inspection program personnel safety. We encourage facilities wishing to employ new technologies to notify to FSIS before they implement them. That way, the Agency can assess the technology in light of the four questions I listed. The Agency convenes an ad hoc group of experts from all relevant parts of the Agency to perform this assessment. FSIS attempts to complete its assessment of the technology within 60 days. Once the assessment is complete, the Agency lets the company know if it has a concern in any of the four areas. If the Agency does, the company has an opportunity to do a study to address that concern.

If the Agency finds no basis for objection to the use of the technology, it posts a brief description of the technology on the FSIS web site in order to inform all interested parties.

Ingredient Technologies

A second aspect of new technology involves the use of new food ingredients in meat food products. Prior to 2000, the review process for new ingredients was lengthy and cumbersome. FDA was responsible for the initial safety review. This was then followed by a review by FSIS to determine the acceptability or suitability of the technology; that is, to determine whether the ingredient served the purpose for which it was intended. In 2000, FSIS and FDA entered into a Memorandum of Understanding

allowing simultaneous review of new technologies to increase the speed with which useful new food ingredients could be used.

FDA now determines the safety of a food ingredient and its safe levels of use, while simultaneously FSIS evaluates whether the ingredient has its intended technical effect. Allowing these evaluations to occur at the same time effectively decreases the time any food ingredient spends in review.

Carbon Monoxide in Meat Packaging

One form of technology used by the meat industry that has received a great deal of attention in recent months is carbon monoxide in packaging. Carbon monoxide is used to stabilize the color pigment of meat, when it is red and, therefore, most appealing to consumers. Use of carbon monoxide in packaging does not impart a color to the meat; it simply maintains its naturally occurring color.

In 2002, carbon monoxide, for use as a component of modified atmosphere packaging, was accepted by FDA as being "Generally Recognized as Safe," or GRAS. Carbon monoxide does not become a part of the product and dissipates as soon as the package is opened. This is unlike other ingredients used to stabilize the red color of meat, such as citric acid, sodium ascorbate, and rosemary extract, all of which actually do become a part of the product. However, to be sure consumers are not misled, FSIS has established a use-by/sell-by date to be included on meat products that use carbon

monoxide packaging. This is to ensure that the shelf life of the product ends before spoilage occurs.

As members of the committee are no doubt aware, FDA has received a petition asking it to withdraw its decision that carbon monoxide in meat packaging is Generally Recognized as Safe. FSIS will continue to make its labeling decisions and its suitability reviews on the basis of FDA's safety conclusions.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to addressing any questions you might have.